The Payson Roundup

Local news

Local water concerns mirror state struggle

By Felicia Megdal, Roundup staff reporter

Tuesday, October 24, 2006

Payson's water-growth issues reflect a microcosm of similar struggles at the state level.

At the behest of Gov. Janet Napolitano, the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR), is addressing these problems and formulating possible solutions during a statewide speaking tour among rural Arizona municipalities.

Herb Guenther, director of ADWR, makes the final stop of the tour in Payson on Friday.

Guenther will present the findings of the Statewide Water Advisory Group (SWAG), which he assembled in May 2006.

"People were surprised, initially, to learn that diverse regions of Arizona had common water-resource issues," Guenther said.

As people seek the slower pace and congestion-free expanses of rural Arizona, the burden on water supplies -- frequently fed by limited groundwater that collects in geologically diverse terrain -- has caused increasing concern at the state level.

"The group has come together on a number of strategies for assuring that growth can be accommodated without placing undue stress on the limited resources of this arid environment," Guenther said.

The 50-member SWAG panel, comprised mostly of town and county municipal administrators, will incorporate the information gleaned during the tour to devise or revise current water legislation for the 2007 legislative session.

Buzz Walker, Town of Payson public works director, said the four-point list of recommendations submitted by SWAG gives local municipalities more autonomy to set water and growth policies.

"The state is showing great interest in the water supplies of rural Arizona," Walker said. "It allows municipalities to consider whether or not they have an adequate water supply."

SWAG's suggestions call for the implementation of regional water districts that could increase the jurisdiction over and taxing power of water usage. The policy would also provide local authority to develop and manage water supplies.

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To support this activity, SWAG recommends the establishment of a water development fund, which has been proposed in past legislation.

The fund would help to support local districts by issuing bonds and using other funding sources.

Payson is already controlling some aspects of development through legal mechanisms -- such as the Equivalent Residential Unit rule and water development fees -- established in its town code. But Gila County, among other Arizona counties, cities and towns, cannot limit development based on the availability of water.

"Basically all they can do is make a decision if (the development) is not appropriate," Walker said.

Local water districts, such as the Pine-Strawberry Water Improvement District, have limited regulatory and taxing abilities, and that's why a one-size cure, Walker said, doesn't work.

Meanwhile, ADWR will still maintain control over the establishments of water rights and determining whether an adequate water supply is available for growth.

Guenther will speak at 9 a.m. Friday, Oct. 27, at Payson town hall.

If you can't make it to the presentation, watch the meeting on Channel 4 or visit www.ci.payson.az.us for the streaming video.

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